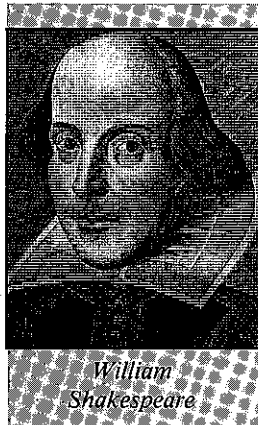




MACBETH



BIOGRAM The Man

Documented information about the life of William Shakespeare is scarce. Sufficient material exists, however, to indicate that Shakespeare's reputation today matches the popular and material success that he knew in his own lifetime. William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon, a small town 90 miles from London. His father, a farm produce dealer and glove manufacturer, served for a time as city official. Shakespeare studied at the local grammar school until he was 14, then became apprenticed to a butcher. At the age of 19, he wed Anne Hathaway, a local woman some nine years older; they eventually had three children.

After a brief stint as rural schoolmaster, Shakespeare moved to London in the late 1580s. There he joined a theatrical company, becoming a noted actor, playwright, and poet. Backed by powerful and influential patrons who eventually included King James I, Shakespeare's company prospered. They rebuilt their theater, the now legendary Globe.

Shakespeare was an astute businessman and became a partner in the company's profits, contributing both writing and acting talents. He performed in his own dramas, which were well received and earned him both acclaim and financial success.

In later years Shakespeare continued his financial interest in The Globe, but went into semiretirement at Stratford. He died there in 1616, revered as the greatest literary mind of his age.

The Technician

William Shakespeare's genius rests in his capacity to express universal truths of the human condition. Although his writing was "commercial," meant for consumption by a mass audience, it possesses a purity and force of language unparalleled in English literature. His works impress both reader and audience with their explorations of life's complexities.

Unlike many modern writers, Shakespeare did not give interviews or write articles about his composition methods. (Or, if he did, nothing has survived the centuries.) Modern readers who would understand Shakespeare's skill as a technician must employ careful study and inductive reasoning.

The plays themselves were not even printed until 1623, after Shakespeare's death. But he did not write for publication; he wrote living works for the approval of influential patrons and for the enjoyment of his audience. Many of Shakespeare's poems were dedicated to prominent courtiers, in the hope of winning favor. The theatrical company at The Globe was dependent on the support of those in power, and when the company eventually won the recognition of James I, it came to be known as the "King's Men."

The major clue to Shakespeare's writing methods lies within the work itself and the few dates available. During the time he was known as London's greatest living playwright, his dramas appeared with great regularity; between 1590 and 1613, he produced nearly 40 plays. It can be assumed that he wrote easily and with speed. Yet, even under the demands of quantity, he did not neglect quality. He retained a unique ability to imbue his work with insight and beauty.

Shakespeare wrote in a variety of genres. Although his dramas won major attention, he was an accomplished poet, particularly noted for the grace and passion of his sonnets. The two long, dramatic poems, "Venus and

Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece," are also of high quality.

Shakespeare was one of the first dramatists to work extensively in blank verse. Blank verse consists of a line of ten syllables arranged so that an unaccented syllable is followed by an accented syllable. The result is five metric feet, *u'/u'/u'/u'/u'/'*. This is iambic pentameter, usually unrhymed; Shakespeare would occasionally end a scene with rhymed lines.

Other stylistic tools utilized by Shakespeare are puns, metaphors, soliloquies, and "asides," a stage convention that allows an actor to speak to the audience without other players overhearing his words. *Macbeth* makes extensive use of the soliloquy, where the character, alone on stage, speaks aloud and expresses thoughts and feelings. In *Macbeth*, with the protagonist and his wife imprisoned in their personal hells, such a tool is particularly useful.

Shakespeare usually worked with plots taken from other sources and enhanced them with his insight. *Macbeth*, thought to have been first presented in 1606, was based on a story from Holinshed's *Chronicles*. It had a particularly contemporary relevance because King James I, who had previously reigned in Scotland, was thought to be a descendant of Banquo. Thus, Banquo's integrity is stressed for political, as well as for literary reasons, and importance is placed on the alliance between Scotland and England.

In the original version, Macbeth slew Duncan to revenge an old grievance, but Shakespeare deletes even this justification. He alters the plot to place Macbeth solely under the dictates of ambition. Macbeth may be influenced by his wife or the witches, but he can find no real wrong to warrant Duncan's death.

The complexities of such drama illustrate Shakespeare's achievements as a playwright. His plays, produced between 1590 and 1612, show a large number of histories, including *King Henry V* and *Richard III*; a number of comedies, of which *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Much Ado About*

Nothing are perhaps best known, and the tragedies, in which he reached new heights of expression. These include *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*.

The Philosopher

As a philosopher, Shakespeare investigates the operation of morality in the real world. The issues confronting his heroes are of great moment, and moral decisions are those that have haunted humanity throughout history.

Perhaps more than any other Shakespearean character, Macbeth is presented with a clear-cut choice between good and evil. Shakespeare masterfully constructs a situation that unrelentingly depicts this stark dilemma of choice. Macbeth may be urged on by supernatural intervention and the aspirations of his wife, yet the moral choice is his and his alone.

Throughout his works, Shakespeare displays a keen understanding of the strength of evil and an awareness that human efforts against this merciless power are often futile. Macbeth's struggle is brief but poignant; he regrets, but never tries to rescind, his decision. He sins and is punished by a nemesis that spells his doom.

Shakespeare's works reflect the ideal of Christian humanism. Man, suspended between the extremes of immortal spirit and temporal flesh, can achieve salvation by accepting the power greater than himself. His acceptance allows him to confront the dilemmas of human existence, emerging with greater wisdom than he had before.

Most Shakespearean tragedies share certain thematic elements recognizable in *Macbeth*. The tragedy focuses on a central protagonist, the tragic hero, whose suffering eventually ends in death. He is a person of high degree, and his actions affect the fate of the nation at large. The plot pivots upon the connection of character-deed-catastrophe; when the protagonist takes a moral stand, the tragedy's course is set and its outcome inevitable.

SYNOPSIS

Macbeth is a tale of treachery and retribution, set against the background of ancient Scotland. During a war with Norway, Duncan, king of Scots, is aided by Macbeth, a trusted nobleman.

Macbeth and Banquo encounter three witch-

es and hear prophecies that promise Macbeth Duncan's throne. The prophecies tempt Macbeth and he plots to murder Duncan. Duncan, believing Macbeth loyal, visits the noble's castle at Inverness; Macbeth, spurred by his ambitious wife, murders the sovereign. Though Macbeth blames corrupted servants for the killing, the king's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, fear treachery and flee the country.

Macbeth is now king but, riddled with fear and anxiety, he is unable to enjoy his triumph. He kills his friend Banquo because the witches have promised Banquo a dynasty of kings; but the killing is in vain for Banquo's son escapes.

Macbeth governs with brutality, so an opposing force is launched from England where many of his subjects have taken refuge. Knowing of the gathering opposition, Macbeth visits the witches again and is reassured by their predictions.

Lady Macbeth becomes ill, consumed by remorse for her part in the killings. When she dies, Macbeth, who has been unable to relish the crown, is now unable to mourn. Life seems void of pain or joy.

When the rebels attack, Macbeth discovers that each of the witches' prophecies has a hidden meaning. He is not invulnerable, as they had led him to believe. Finally, Macduff, a rebel leader, slays Macbeth. The battle is lost, and Duncan's son Malcolm is proclaimed king of Scotland.

ANALYSIS

The plays of William Shakespeare seize reader and audience attention at two levels. Action is bold and enthralling but, more important, insight and great emotive power investigate the human predicament. *Macbeth* is certainly one of Shakespeare's most exciting and moving plays; but it has received more praise for its insightful approach to the problem of good and evil.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare achieves a full-fledged morality play, for characters enact an apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and evil, profoundly aware of the consequences of their acts. Evil is examined from an almost theological viewpoint as Macbeth, with his grim and irrevocable decision, falls from grace and ensures his doom.

A cursory analysis might conclude that Macbeth was led to sin by the witches, but this would involve a misinterpretation of Shakespeare's philosophy. For while the witch-

es function as malicious agents of perversion, it is the tragic flaw within Macbeth, his unbridled ambition, that spurs him to his fatal act and to damnation. In Shakespeare's Christian tradition, man is a self-determining entity, endowed by an all-powerful deity with responsibility for his own behavior. God has given man freedom of choice, and that freedom carries with it the concomitant risk that man may choose to sin.

Macbeth is particularly effective as a stage production because it is an action drama of enormous vitality. It has been presented, from Shakespeare's time to the present, with a rich variety of stage effects. Producers usually indulge themselves with extensive employment of trap doors for the apparitions, imaginative costuming for the witches, and extravagant sound effects.

In addition to powerful stage effects, *Macbeth* reverberates with the passion and purity of its dialogue. The play is one of Shakespeare's shorter dramas, but its impact is intensified by the majesty of its poetry. Shakespeare was himself a performing actor, so it is understandable that the evocative, ringing speeches that illuminate his dramas add scope to both the thespian and literary arts.

Many critics have also noted that the play was a vehicle for displaying courtesy to England's new monarch. It is generally held that Shakespeare intentionally sought a Scottish background for his play, so that he might compliment James Stuart. The king had ascended the English throne only two or three years prior to the first performance of *Macbeth*. According to Scottish lore, Banquo was the ancestor of the Stuart dynasty; the many references to Banquo's moral probity, and to the English king's restorative power, were gestures to honor the new king.

Critics find, too, that the characters in *Macbeth* are especially full-bodied and powerfully real. They lend themselves to personal scrutiny so that the reader tends to identify with them. The reader sees and feels the cold ambition that drives Macbeth to murder and the anguish that tortures the guilty couple. Their inability to relish dearly bought success and the final numb indifference to their bleak and meaningless world form living characterizations. This "mirror up to nature" is a masterful achievement in dramatic art.